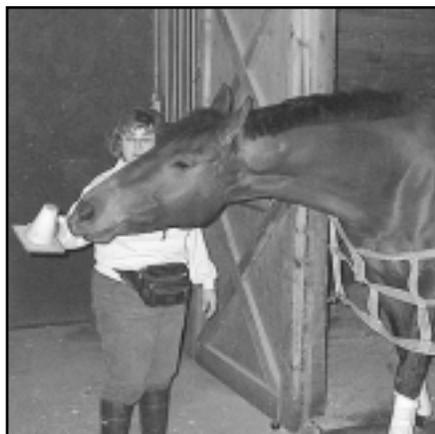


Clicker Train Your Horse

Reinforcing Desired Behaviors

Problem solving an issue with one of my horses has often led me down little-known avenues of horse training. Clicker training is a method that has deep roots in sea mammal training, and has even great inroads into dog training. But horses? A growing group of horse-men and women are discovering the benefits!



When the horse touches the target, reward him with a click and a treat.



Proper treat delivery is important. Always extend your hand away from your body.

and my mare was no exception. She reached out and touched the cone with her nose. Click! Followed quickly by a carrot.

That finished my mare's the interest in the cone for a while. She was much more interested in getting into my pockets and obtaining more carrots. I ig-

nored this behavior, and steadfastly held the cone out in front of her. Within a minute or so, she got bored with frisking me and revisited the cone. She reached out and touched it again, received another click— and reward.

Most horses learn the targeting game in no time flat. By the end of the first session, they will have a firm understanding that they can control the vending machine (you!), by touching their nose to the target.

Targeting is fun, but what about practical use? Once your horse learns to target, you can use it to teach him to lead, trailer load, walk over scary objects, back up, and stand in a certain place in his stall. You can teach him fun games like fetch and take a bow. You can even teach your horse to target certain body parts to your hand, like his chin, or his ear. (A definite bonus for teaching clipping!) There is an awful lot of training that can happen as a result of teaching targeting alone.

What about my mare and her foot-handling problem? Once she understood the concept of click = reward, I began using clicker training to pick her feet up. I started with her on a lead in her stall. I stood on her left side, facing her shoulder, and applied pressure to the point of her shoulder. The instant her foot began to lift from the ground, I clicked and removed the pressure on her shoulder, then gave her a bit of carrot. Within 20 minutes, I could lightly apply a finger to the point of her shoulder, and she would pick the foot up without any extraneous moving about. That was the end of that session. Over the next several days, she learned to do this with all four feet, and extended duration so that she could hold herself up until she was released with the click/reward. By the next farrier visit, she was a model citizen. She no longer needs to be reinforced every time she picks up and holds her feet. After this success, I've used clicker training to teach my mare many new behaviors.

There are a couple of things to keep in mind when teaching this to your horse. He may display a variety of behaviors while trying to earn a treat. As long as you are safe, you should *ignore all other behavior* except the exact one you are trying to teach.

Simply put, clicker training is based on documented behavioral science. Every living thing will try to repeat behavior that is reinforced, and unreinforced behavior tends to fade out over time. Here's a common example: a child goes to the store with her mother, and begins to whine and cry that she wants a lollipop. At first, the mother says, "No! You've had enough lollipops this week!" The child continues to cry and carry on, and the exasperated mother gives in. Do you think the child is more, or less likely to cry next time she goes to the store? Since crying worked last time, it is very likely that the girl will repeat the behavior again. On the other hand, if the mother had noticed her daughter acting happily as they approached the store, she might mark that happy behavior with a positive comment and reward. "You know what? You sure are a happy little girl, and very well-behaved, too! I think you deserve a lollipop!" It's easy to see how this might result in a repeat of that excellent behavior.

Back to horses. I had read about clicker training and had even bought a book and a video. It was interesting, but I wasn't motivated to put it to use at that time. Finally, I pulled out "Clicker Training For Your Horse," by Alexandra Kurland, to address my mare's problem's with farrier visits. I skipped straight to the chapter on handling feet. Armed with a clicker, a target, and a bag of carrots, I set out to see what I could achieve.

The first step is to acquaint your horse with the clicker, and to associate the sound with a reward. There are a variety of methods of doing this, and Alex's is to teach targeting. Start with your horse in a stall with a guard across the front. I held a small training cone out in front of my mare, and waited. (You can use nearly any recognizable object as a "target", a supplement container lid, the end of a whip, or a brightly-colored potholder, for example.) Curiosity will get the best of any horse,

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Amy Lacy

Timing is important. If you click while your horse is putting his foot down, rather than while it is on its way up, you may end up with a horse that stands rooted to the ground like he's grown there! The good news is, this is the most forgiving training method on earth. Remember that behavior that is reinforced tends to be repeated, while unreinforced behavior will fade out. (Even if you inadvertently teach your horse something you don't want him to know, it's a simple thing to train him out of it.)

Clicker trainers should always be aware of their safety. There are a couple of ground rules to keep in mind if you decide to try clicker training your horse. First, if your horse gets overeager, put him on the other side of a fence, stall guard, or other area where you can easily step away from him. Horses learn from receiving time-outs, just like children do. If he should take a nip or swipe at you, or persists in frisking your pockets for treats, step back out of his reach, turn your back, and count to ten before returning to your training. Always be very deliberate in your treat delivery. Keep your hand out of the goody jar (treat pocket) if you want your horse to concentrate on his training! Once he has performed and received a click, reach into your pocket, get the treat, then extend your arm *away* from your body before opening your hand to deliver it. If your horse gets grumpy, it probably means he's confused or you are not reinforcing often enough for your stage of teaching. Just back up a step, and ramp up your treat delivery. He'll understand soon enough!

Clicker training has changed every aspect of my relationship with my horses. I now feel as if we are having a conversation, rather than me just handing out a string of directives. I ask, they respond, "Sure!" and I say, "Thanks!" A row of happy faces awaits my arrival in the barn and each horse wants to come out and play. I use clicker principles both on the ground and under saddle. I no longer use a mechanical clicker, but have perfected a specific "cluck" noise using my tongue. (Unlike my clicker, it's never back in the barn when I need it!) Feeding treats is great, but isn't the *only* way to reinforce behavior. One of my geldings is particularly fond of being scratched high on his hip. He'll do anything for a scratch. (Not that he turns down treats, of course!)

Amy Lacy has been involved with horses for more than 20 years/ She recently completed an apprenticeship with Kathy and Ron Valentine of Heart-Centered Horsemanship, and holds an Assistant Instructor Certificate from Pacific Horse Center, formerly operated by well-known horseman, Larry Langer. Amy has cliniced with master clicker trainer, Alexandra Kurland, and will be traveling to New York this summer to attend the inaugural Clicker Instructor workshop. She and her four horses live in Monroe, Washington. You can contact her at amy@amylacy.com

Just for fun!

"The Pose"



Above left: Teach the horse to target his chin to your cupped hand. Amy's horse, Sagenhaft, demonstrates "The Pose" on the right. His neck is correctly flexed with his poll at the highest point and his face on the vertical. His weight is shifted back over his hindquarters, and his shoulders are lifted.

Once your horse is targeting very well, you can move on to more advanced applications of this behavior. Many clicker trainers have taught their horses to "pose" in self-carriage. This develops the top line muscles isometrically, and also prepares your horse for the feeling of self-carriage under saddle.

Here is one way to teach your horse "The Pose":

1. Cup your horse's chin in your hand, saying "CHIN" clearly. Click, remove your hand, and present a treat. Do this repeatedly, until the horse seems eager to touch his chin to your hand.

2. Hold your cupped hand 1/4" to 1/2" away from your horse's chin and say "Chin". If he doesn't tuck his chin down to touch your palm, go back to step 1.

If he does tuck down to touch your hand, click, reward with an extra special treat (a "jackpot," in clicker terminology), and praise him lavishly. Continue with this step, gradually moving your hand further and further from his chin, so that he has to exaggerate the movement.

3. Fade out the hand signal, and just use the word "Chin" to signal him to round up. Click and treat. At this point, he will probably begin over flexing. That is okay during the initial period, while he is learning the task. After he is consistently flexing his neck on command, you can begin withholding the click until he presents the exact body shape you want. At first, you will reward everything that even shows effort toward what you want. Gradually raise the standard, until your horse shows a correctly flexed neck with his face on the vertical and the poll at the highest point. His shoulders will lift, and there is a noticeable shift of his weight backward.

4. At this point, you can begin fading out the "CHIN" command, and introduce a cue of your choosing. I have several cues for this behavior. The cue demonstrated in the photo is pointing my finger at his nose.

My horse also responds to the phrase, "Strike a Pose!" I taught my horse to use this as a "default behavior". If I am in his presence and I haven't given him any other cue, he is to pose. He will be rewarded periodically for offering this behavior of his own volition.